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Casi Como Madres: Examining the Role of Grandmothers in Global Care Chains

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**Casí Como Madres**

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# Casí Como Madres

## GRANDMOTHER CAREGIVERS “MOTHERING AGAIN” IN NICARAGUAN FAMILIES OF TRANSNATIONAL MIGRANT MOTHERS

### GRANDMOTHERS: A LINK IN GLOBAL CARE CHAINS

IN THE INTRODUCTION to their edited volume *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy*, Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild describe how the globalization of women's work has led to the formation of global care chains, through which women from impoverished countries of the Global South migrate in order to occupy jobs caring for children, households, and families of women in wealthy nations of the industrialized, Global North (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002:4). The analyses of Ehrenreich, Hochschild and other feminist scholars have illuminated how women's migration is essential

to upholding transnational structures of social reproduction, which in turn support economic systems and reinforce global social inequalities (Yeates 2005). Around the globe, immigrant women engage in underpaid, labor-intensive work in the domestic or service sectors, and many experience the additional marginalization and vulnerability of their undocumented status. Migrant mothers engage in the particular sacrifices of leaving children behind and subsequently sending large proportions of their income back home over periods of potentially prolonged absence.

While making important contributions to our understanding of transnational social reproduction, the existing literature on mother migration has left largely unaddressed the question of

who cares for children “back home” in migrant-origin countries. My dissertation research aims to fill this gap through an exploration of the experiences of grandmother caregivers in Nicaraguan families of transnational mother migrants. Moving beyond merely structural or political-economic accounts of migration, I am interested in what anthropologist Caroline Brettell calls “the lived experiences of migration” (Brettell 2002:224); in other words, in the ways mother migration reconfigures family life and relations of care among families “left behind” in sending countries such as Nicaragua. Throughout my dissertation, I foreground the relational, interpersonal, and emotional dimensions of migration as evidenced through the lives of grandmothers and the children in their care.

## **NICARAGUAN (TRANSNATIONAL) MOTHER MIGRATION**

MY DISSERTATION is based on eleven months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Managua, Nicaragua's capital city, and three rural departamentos.<sup>1</sup> All the families participating in my study were composed of a grandmother who had assumed primary caregiving responsibilities for one or more children after a mother (or father, for comparison purposes) had migrated. To give a brief background, contemporary migration from Nicaragua is motivated primarily by economic "push" factors: namely, chronic poverty, un- and underemployment, and low wages. Women currently make up over half of all Nicaraguan migrants, mirroring patterns prevalent throughout Latin America (Pessar 2005). Principal destinations for Nicaraguan migrants include: Costa Rica, Panamá, and other Central American nations, along with the United States and Spain. Like female migrants globally, Nicaraguan women usually find work as domésticas or in the service sector in destination countries. To give one example of the wage inequalities that "pull" Nicaraguans abroad: a woman working as a doméstica in San José, Costa Rica might make \$500/month; whereas for the same work in Managua, Nicaragua, she would be paid the minimum wage salary of approximately \$150/month. The reasons mothers leave children behind when they

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migrate are complex but include the risks of illicit border crossings and immigration policies that place documented (“legal”) migration out of reach for most migrants. When Nicaraguan mother migrants leave children behind, they usually depend on the caregiving support of extended female kin such as grandmothers. In fact, having a grandmother willing and able to assume caregiving responsibilities may facilitate a mother’s initial migration decision (Centeno Orozco and Gutiérrez Vega 2007).

## GRANDMOTHER CAREGIVERS IN TRANSNATIONAL FAMILIES

IN THIS ARTICLE, I provide a necessarily brief overview of grandmother’s experiences of “mothering again” for another generation of (grand)children in Nicaraguan families of migrant mothers. Despite the fact that grandmothers assume caregiving for children over often-prolonged periods of mothers’ absence (the mean duration of migration for families in my study was 2.5 years, with a range of 6 months to 12 years), grandmothers’ roles as surrogate mothers are tenuous and precarious. In what follows, I illustrate this point using the example of Aurora, a grandmother who cared for two granddaughters “como si fueran su madre” (as if I were their mother) after their mother migrated to Spain.

Before going on, it’s important to clarify that, although my focus is on the lived experiences of families “left behind” by contemporary transnational migration, I in no way intend to fault Nicaraguan mothers who make the decision to migrate in order to support children and families “back home”. The economic necessity pushing mothers to migrate is recognized by all the grandmothers in my study (in addition to most of the children I interviewed). Furthermore, all the families in my study regularly received remittances sent by mother migrants, which average between \$100 and \$500 per month. Grandmothers receive, manage, and allocate these remittances on three main priorities related to children’s care: 1) food, 2) education, and 3) health care. This finding from my research reflects what other migration scholars have suggested, which is that mother migrants remit a larger portion of their income more regularly over time than fathers (Orozco, Paiewonsky, and Domínguez 2008).

## MOTHERING AGAIN FOR CHILDREN OF MIGRANTS

GRANDMOTHERS VIEW their caregiving for children of migrant mothers as an extension of their roles as mothers across the generations. Further, grandmothers frame their reproductive responsibilities at home as a sacrifice

parallel to that made by mothers who migrate abroad in order to economically support households. Grandmothers experience caring for grandchildren as being “como una madre” (“like a mother”) because they engage in all the reproductive activities essential to sustaining children’s welfare in mothers’ absence. Evelyn Glenn has defined social reproduction as “the array of activities and relationships involved in maintaining people both on a daily basis and intergenerationally”, which involves activities such as purchasing and preparing food, maintaining household cleanliness, providing care and emotional support, and maintaining kin and community ties (Glenn 1992:1). The grandmothers in my study not only engage in all of these reproductive activities, but also form strong emotional ties with the (grand)children in their care as part of their “mothering again” for children of migrant mothers.

Grandmother caregiving in migrant mother families is evidence of the ways kinship relations reflect dynamic, historically-situated processes of “family making” (Leinaweaver and Seligmann 2009:1). Grandmothers’ surrogate motherhood can be understood as a cultural response to the political and economic insecurity that has resulted in the increasingly widespread migration of Nicaraguan mothers. Furthermore, I argue that grandmother caregiving in Nicaraguan transnational families offers an ethnographic

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example of what anthropologists working in various cultural settings have referred to as “non-exclusive maternity” or “multiple childcare” (Seymour 2004). As grandmothers assume responsibilities for the daily reproductive activities culturally assigned to mothers, and (biological/ migrant) mothers work abroad to economically support children, the responsibilities of mothering are shared (albeit not necessarily equally) across national borders between these two generations of women.

### **PRECARIOUSNESS OF MOTHERING ROLES**

Because mother migration is assumed to be a temporary response to economic hardship, grandmothers negotiate their surrogate motherhood within the uncertainty of the future for transnational family life; specifically, the possibility of mother return (to Nicaragua) or child reunification with mothers (in destination countries). For this reason, despite the investments grandmothers make in caring for (grand) children in migrant mothers' absence, their roles as surrogate mothers are precarious. During my fieldwork, after observing the close emotional ties between grandmothers and the children in their care, I was often surprised that grandmothers would insist “no hay como el amor de la madre” (there's nothing like a mother's love).

In making this claim, grandmothers are reflecting the ideological primacy of the mother-child tie in Nicaraguan culture, even while their own practices of loving care illustrate the importance of multiple mothering.

This apparent contradiction, between (grand) motherhood in practice and grandmothers' assertions about the irreplaceability of (biological/migrant) mothers, is one I continue to analyze in my research. Nonetheless, I have come to view grandmothers' claims about the importance of mothers' physical and emotional presence in children's lives as a broader lament about the ways that transnational migration is transfiguring Nicaraguan family relationships and undermining cultural expectations for family life. As grandmothers, the women participating in my study find themselves in a life stage when they would normally expect to receive support from their adult daughters. However, mother migration makes this cultural expectation impossible and, instead of receiving support, grandmothers find themselves responsible for raising another generation of children. Thus, grandmothers living with the consequences of mother migration inevitably experience a certain amount of disruption to their expectations for "unidad" (unity) and "solidaridad" (solidarity) in family life.

## GRANDMOTHER SACRIFICE: AURORA'S CASE

THE TENUOUSNESS of grandmothers' roles as surrogate mothers is foregrounded in the face of children's potential "reunification" with mothers in destination countries, as illustrated in the case of Aurora. Aurora cared for her two granddaughters, aged 8 and 12, since their mother Elizabeth (Aurora's daughter) migrated to Spain two years prior. Elizabeth worked as a doméstica, and sent back nearly half her monthly earnings to Aurora to cover the costs of caring for her children. Like other women in my study, Aurora insisted that remittance money "casi no se ajusta" ("barely makes ends meet"), which I argue is a way for grandmothers to distance themselves from social stereotypes that claim they are motivated to care for grandchildren by money rather than love. Also like other grandmothers, Aurora feels a responsibility to maintain the emotional connection between herself, her daughter, and her granddaughters despite the distance and time that characterize transnational family life. Thus, during the two years of Elizabeth's absence, Aurora made sure her granddaughters regularly communicated with their mother via telephone and internet. Aurora herself became accustomed to the everyday routines involved with raising her granddaugh-

ters, which she told me gave her a renewed sense of energy and purpose in her life. Aurora described these routines this way: I felt good because I had their affection and during the time that I had them, I had a routine of getting up in the morning to send them off to school every day. I felt good. In the morning one of the girls went to school, and I got up at four-thirty to make her breakfast, her lunchbox. She took her lunch, and I got her ready, bathed her, dressed her, and took her to the bus stop. Then I woke her sister up at nine or ten to give her a bath... and I dressed her, because they [her granddaughters] had gotten used to me and wanted me to do it.

While these everyday routines of care strengthened the emotional connection between Aurora and her granddaughters, and even though she felt she was "como una madre" (like a mother) to her granddaughters, Aurora was willing to relinquish her role as surrogate mother when Elizabeth told her she was going to "reunify" with her daughters. In fact, Aurora facilitated her granddaughters' migration to Spain, processing necessary paperwork for their Nicaraguan passports and obtaining permission to travel from their (reluctant and resistant) father.

I had occasion to interview Aurora within a week of her granddaughters' departure, and found her visibly grieving. Through tears, Aurora

told me she was “contando los días” (counting the days) since the girls had left, that she was crying after her granddaughters just like she cried after her daughter migrated, and that she was feeling the same “vacío” (emptiness) all over again. Still, Aurora viewed her emotional pain as a sacrifice necessary to facilitate her granddaughters’ reunification with their mother. Aurora was also receiving moral support from the girls, with whom she had already “chatted” using a webcam and internet connection, and who told her, “Don’t cry because we’re going to be happy.” In this moment, so soon after her granddaughters’ departure, Aurora’s grief spills over time such that her granddaughters’ recent departure encompasses the loss of her daughter two years prior, and with the same result: that Aurora is left to cope with the emotional consequences of two generations of migration.

I have come to understand the lived experiences of grandmothers like Aurora to exemplify the precariousness of grandmothers’ roles as surrogate mothers in transnational families. Grandmothers sacrifice their roles as being “como una madre” and their emotional connection to (grand)children when faced with the potential of children’s reunification with their (biological/migrant) mothers. Grandmothers make this sacrifice for the same reason that mothers engage in the sacrifice of migration: because Nicaraguan women across the generations are

willing to give of themselves for the sake of their children. Still, while scholars have focused on the sacrifices of migrant mothers, much more attention is needed on the roles of grandmothers in migrant-sending countries like Nicaragua who assume the responsibilities of child rearing, ensuring social reproduction and maintaining cultural continuity in spite of the disruptive potential of transnational migration.

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